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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#) [LH](#)  
SUBJECT: LITHUANIAN AND BELARUSIAN AIR FORCE COMMANDERS  
MEET ABOUT BORDER INCURSION

Classified By: Pol/Econ officer Traver Gudie for reasons 1.4 b,d.

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Lithuanian Air Force Commander Arturas Leita invited Belarus's Air Force Commander Oleg Paferov to Lithuania to discuss an alleged June 19 border incursion by a Belarusian helicopter into Lithuanian territory, an event which Belarus denies. The Lithuanian side was seeking an explanation for the incursion: a June diplomatic note to Belarus remains unanswered. Ministry officials told us that the Belarusian Commander continued to stonewall, pointing to Lithuania's inability to prove the incursion. Although Lithuania maintains working level contacts with the Belarusian military and pursues a bilateral cooperation plan with Belarus, this meeting was at a higher level than normal for an official invitation (although the commanders often meet unofficially). According to Lithuanian Defense officials, Belarus frequently (but unsuccessfully) seeks higher level meetings with Lithuanian counterparts, and has exploited recent border incidents to get them. End Summary.

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Lithuania fails to get explanation from Belarus  
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12. (C) Lithuania's Air Force Commander invited his Belarusian counterpart to Kaunas, Lithuania for bilateral talks July 27-28. The Defense Ministry's Belarus desk officer Gediminas Sereika told us on July 24 that the primary impetus for these talks -- held at a higher level than usual -- was to discuss a June 19 border incursion by a Belarusian helicopter, although the agenda also included Lithuania's bilateral military cooperation with Belarus. On July 31, Sereika told us that the sides discussed the incident only briefly, as the Belarusians denied that the incursion ever happened.

13. (C) Sereika told us that the Ministry had tried several times to engage the Belarusian government about the incursion, calling in the Belarusian Defense Attache and sending a diplomatic note. The Belarusian officials stonewalled, denying that the helicopter crossed the border and refusing to discuss the incident further. He said that the Lithuanian Defense Attache in Minsk had been told that higher level contact was necessary to address the border incident. Although the Commanders had met informally before, Belarus demanded an official invitation for this meeting. After the meeting, Sereika remarked that the Belarusian side was "happier with the meeting than we are." The Belarusian Commander still refused to engage on the question and called the incursion an "optical illusion" during a press conference after the meeting.

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Defense Ministry trying to look tough in the press  
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¶4. (C) Following the meeting, Lithuanian Armed Forces Commander Valdas Tutkus told the press that Belarus and Lithuania agreed to improve their "hotline" arrangement whereby their respective Air Force Commanders can directly contact each other in the event of a border incursion. Tutkus then outlined Lithuanian proposals that Belarus not hold military exercises near the border or, alternatively, that Belarus notify Lithuania of such exercises in advance. Sereika said that the sides discussed their hotline procedures, but there was no change to the existing arrangement. Sereika told us that Belarus did not (and most probably would not) accept the proposals that Tutkus outlined publicly, but had agreed to state during the press conference that the sides would work on improving the arrangement.

¶5. (C) The agreement to improve the hotline arrangement and the Lithuanian proposals were a part of the Ministry's press strategy, said Sereika. The June 19 border incursion attracted widespread press attention in Lithuania and the Defense Ministry's State Secretary had to appear before Parliament to answer questions about the incursion. The day before the meeting, the Ministry placed a news story on the Lithuanian wire service titled: "Belarusian Air Force Chief to Hear Unpleasant Questions about Lithuanian Air Space Violations."

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Lithuania pursues working level contacts with Belarus  
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¶6. (C) Sereika told us that Lithuania pursues continued dialogue with working-level Belarusian Defense Ministry counterparts, but Belarus frequently tries to push meetings to a higher level. Lithuania and Belarus maintain a bilateral cooperation plan that provides for annual meetings of the heads of their International Relations Departments and the training of Belarusian Ministry officers with the rank of major. Sereika said that on almost every occasion Belarus suggests a higher level delegation, which Lithuania refuses.

¶7. (C) According to Sereika, Belarusian Defense Officials seek practical advice and assistance about armed forces transformation during their bilateral meetings, specifically advice about managing costs and managing salaries and pensions. Belarusian officials also sought Lithuanian advice on engaging in an international mission. The Belarusians claim, according to Sereika, to have 15 trained officers ready to take part in an international mission, and have sought information about Lithuania's international operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo (although they did not express interest in any particular mission).

¶8. (C) Lithuania offers three- to six-month English language training to Belarusian military officers on a constant basis. Belarus's Defense Ministry treats these as rewards (Lithuania provides housing and per diem), he said, rather than opportunities to train officers who will use English. Nevertheless, the primary benefit comes from mixing the officers with the other officers in the course who come from Lithuania's "neighborhood" countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) and take a concurrent course about NATO and EU relations that the Belarusian officers do not take.

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) While by their own account Lithuanian officials did not get what they wanted from the Belarusian Commander's visit, the Ministry nevertheless exploited the visit to look like it was doing something about airspace violations. The Lithuanian Defense Ministry's policy of pursuing working

level engagement with Belarus while avoiding higher level meetings is consistent with the GOL's overall Belarus policy and the EU-enunciated policy parameters that inform Lithuanian efforts. As Belarus's neighbor, Lithuania thinks that it must solve some sensitive issues with Belarus by engaging Belarus at working levels. This meeting rose to the service commander level because of the importance of airspace violations to Lithuanian policy and public perceptions; it does not, we think, constitute an upgrading of the bilateral relationship.

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